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Zöller, Michael

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Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Jagodzinski, Universität zu Köln, Institut für Angewandte Sozialforschung, Greinstr. 2, D-50939 Köln

6. Between assimilation and separation. American Catholicism as a testcase

Michael Zöllner

In any European city you will find a cathedral in the historic center and after climbing a lot of stairs you will see how the modern living-quarters with their high-rise buildings surround the inner city like a belt. In an American city you will find an impressive skyscraper owned by an insurance company right in the center. After taking an elevator up to the platform you will see the city stretching to the horizons and nothing sticking out, except for churches, dozens of churches. In the inner districts these churches are showing very different features, reflecting the time they were built and the taste of the immigrants who built them. But beyond the inner city they become as uniform as the suburbs and the middle class they belong to. America is not only different it also contradicts the conventional wisdom of social science.

I will only mention two established opinions one of which is at odds with the American experience in general the other one more specifically with the American Catholic experience.

The first one of course is the theory of secularization in its most basic form, the expectation of a steady decline and final disappearance of religion. American history does not support this belief in the end of belief. In a culture which emphasizes sharing, joining and belonging the principle that everybody should belong to a religion had to prevail in the long run.

Anyway America became more religious in the course of her history not less and religion more and more became identified with middle class. 80 percent of all Americans belong to a church or a synagogue and however one might define middle-class the important difference to Europe is, that church members are close to the average in almost every respect. They are not the older, less educated, female inhabitants of economically backward rural regions, but resemble the white suburban population and Catholics even more so than Protestants. Therefore the least stable situation you can be born into is non – affiliate. More than 80 percent of Americans who were born without religious affiliation acquire one later on.

But the conventional wisdom of social science has also produced another less explicit but powerful assumption. For lack of a better term I call it the evolutionary expectation. When we study religion as sociologists we understand religions as bodies of teachings which restrict and direct social behaviour and thereby create social institutions.

But then there is a decision to be made. We can look at religions as competing ways of dealing with society and cultural change, developing new institutional forms out of their own tradition while adjusting to new circumstances, or we can look at religions as stages of the human mind, following each other and replacing each other because the latest forms are more advanced and therefore superior. In the long run religion is supposed to perform a last service to society by transcending itself and taking on the form of some cultural protestantism or civic-mindedness.

American Catholicism can serve as a test case, because long before cultural Protestantism and other German subtleties, American Protestants were convinced that America was a Protestant country and that Protestantism, democracy and progress depended on each other while the same was true for Catholicism, despotism and Old-World-decadence.

This firm belief provided some coherence for an otherwise very diverse American Protestantism, but it was also accepted by other observers. There seemed to be no way of reconciling Rome and Washington.

So let me now try to indicate a few steps on the way which took American Catholicism from the margins into the center of American society.

I.

The first step obviously has to do with Immigration and the nativist reaction against Immigration. Following the territorial expansion in the first part of the 19th century the United States experienced an enormous increase in population. The numbers grew from about 23 Million in 1850 to 76 Million in 1900 which means that the population more than tripled and between 1900 and 1923 (when immigration was restricted by new laws) another increase of 25 % occurred. There were three different waves of immigration: before and after 1850, in the 80s and before and after World War I.

The first brought immigrants from north-western-Europe, most of them from Germany and from Ireland reaching the peak with the Irish famine in 1847 and 48. The second in the 80s was predominantly German and the third one eastern and south-eastern-European.

The Irish immigrants who came first and in greater numbers were the most impoverished immigrants and they stayed in the cities along the eastern seaboard looking for employment. The Germans usually had some vocational training. They tended to be self-employed or to go into farming and they moved away from the east coast into what became the so-called German triangle between Toledo, Cincinnati and Milwaukee which was later on extended along the Mississippi to St. Louis and from Wisconsin into the north-west to St. Paul, Minnesota and Bismarck, South Dakota.

The third wave coincided with the high-tide of industrialization, so Jews from Russia found employment in New York's East-Side in the textile sweat shops, Slovaks worked in the Steel-mills of Pittsburgh and Polish immigrants went to Detroit and Chicago.

Immigration changed the denominational composition of the American society mainly because the Catholic percentage grew from less than 1 % in 1790 to 10 % when the Civil War began, to 20 % when mass-immigration came to an end, and finally to around 29 % today. Most disturbing of course was the massive presence of poor Irish immigrants who reportedly did not at all behave shy in any way.

So all along the eastcoast a whole industry of anti-Catholic cultural propaganda sprang up. Journals like the Protestant, the Recorder, the Observer were founded to expose the »dangers of popery« as one of them announced on the front page already. Societies were founded which produced and distributed pamphlets warning against foreign conspiracies undermining American liberty.

In this cultural war American Catholics had learned two things.

First: in a democracy you have to build political muscle in order to defend your interests. So after first being led by diplomatic French bishops, refugees of the French Revolution so to say, they united behind a new generation of Irish bishops like the very outspoken Bishop John Hughes of New York. They also realized how important it is to build and maintain their own institutions like a Catholic school system independent of the state.

II.

The second important step in the development of American Catholicism is the so-called great crisis, an internal conflict full of serious reasoning on religion and culture but also full of intrigue and powerplay. »I will try to make a complicated story as short as possible.«

When the aggressive and organized anti-Catholicism receded internal differences (which had been on the backburner so to say) became visible. Suddenly the question if and how far Catholicism can be americanized became the subject of an inner-Catholic debate. The Americanist faction accused their opponents of being un-American and they in turn questioned the orthodoxy of their opponents. The debate developed around questions like whether or not to maintain ethnic parishes where the native language of the immigrants was spoken and whether or not to maintain Catholic schools.

While the so-called Americanists insisted that the church as a whole would only advance by being Americanized as rapidly as possible their opponents were afraid the immigrants would loose their faith if they were deprived of their native language and customs. But actually (inspite of the polemic) this was not an either – or – alternative. The German and Polish priests in Milwaukee and Detroit saw to it, that the parish offered English language courses for the immigrant himself and provided a school-education for his children. On the other hand no Irish Americanist was ready to sacrifice any Catholic teaching in order to accelerate integration. So the debate was not really about Americanizing the church or not (because everybody realized it was happening already) the debate was about the right mixture of adaptation and distance or integration and separation.

But still this question divided the American church, producing two camps among the bishops and leaving a lot of animosity (Bishop John Ireland f.e. the most vocal member of the Americanist group, called his opponents »the enemy«).

The fight over how to become American and still remain Catholic could not be avoided because in principle the American Protestant way of conflict-resolution (to multiply denominations so that everybody can find his own kind of church) was not available within the catholic framework. The ethnic parish came quite close but only for the first generations of immigrants in a heavily ethnic neighbourhood and only as long as it was in nobodys interest to ask whether the Catholic church should really be organized along ethnic lines. This changed when the American bishops formed two ethnic factions. Even though there were a few Irish bishops in the so-called conservative group the Americanist camp consisted of Irish bishops only and all the German speaking bishops belonged to the opposing camp.

By and large the Irish faction tended to be stronger in administration, like the Irish in general had the advantage that the British, unintendedly had forced upon them two important abilities, the english language and political skills. The Germans on the other hand tended to be strong in education and together with the Jesuits who were conservative at that time they dominated many seminaries.

So Americanization in the 1880s and 90s was not only seen as a progressive agenda it also was to the advantage of the Irish, whereas at that time multiculturalism was part of the conservative reasoning and was favoured by german and polish catholics. In reality (as I said before) there never was such a clear cut alternative, as the ethnic parish, the most important social institution of that period, clearly shows. The ethnic parish was important in preserving a cultural identity (which by the way in many respects already was much more a product of the new world, than a heritage from the old world) but it also was an agent of Americanization, it provided stability and facilitated change, it worked like a halfway house.

III.

Now let me turn to a third period: Between 1900 and the end of the Second World War the American Catholics worked their way out of their ghetto and gradually transformed their own institutions. First of all they moved to a more abstract identity, substituting a catholic milieu for the ethnic parish. This change is most visible in intermarriage. While the second generation of Polish immigrants still marries a Polish partner, the third generation does not follow this pattern but most likely marries another Catholic.

The church-hierarchy meanwhile often unintendedly was preparing the ground for still another more abstract identity by building up a national structure. There are the powerful bishops like Mundelein or Dougharty who preside over a flock which meanwhile has acquired some money, and these so called brick-and-mortar-bishops not only like to build churches, schools and hospitals they also get media-attention. But in addition to the media it is the war which produces a nationwide public and leads to the establishment of organizational structures on a national level. A »National Catholic War Council« was built to coordinate all the services for catholic soldiers and after the war the letter W is left and the Catholic War Council becomes the Catholic Welfare Conference, the predecessor of todays national Catholic organisations in Washington. The war-effort always leads to an increase in bureaucracy which does not recede after the war. But for the American Catholics both

world wars were important in another way also. Many American soldiers met other soldiers who happened to be Catholic but turned out to be as American as anybody.

In addition there was a huge government-program after the second war, intended to reintegrate the returning soldiers by providing college-tuition and other financial support. This so called G-I-Bill for many Catholics was the final push into the middle class, and the middle class residing in the suburbs is where from the 50s on American Catholics were firmly established.

The American Catholics had finally made it and critics found, they had become as prosperous and dull as the 50s in general. Whether this is doing justice to the 50s or not – it sure enough changed in the 60s and 70s, when the joy of achievement gave way to a pessimistic mood. Again American Catholics were speaking about crisis and fighting each other over how to deal with American culture, but this time of course emphasizing America was a conservative agenda and the controversies did not develop along ethnic lines. In this new kind of cultural warfare both camps took the Vatican council as a watershed as if the church history had only begun in 1963, or as if every problem had originated from there.

Church attendance dropped and vocations declined – and there was a right wing and a leftwing position to every question. Both camps had developed their own organizations, publications and spokespersons on a national level. American Catholicism had made still another transition. First the ethnic church of immigrants was transformed into the Catholic milieu and now the Catholic identity had become even more abstract. This e.g. meant that while at first the political orientation of Catholics seemed to follow from their being Catholic, now what kind of Catholics they tended to be was influenced by their political opinions.

Anyway – the mood changed again in the 80s. The decline in numbers was discontinued (or at least slowed down) and, even more important, the numbers were interpreted in a more sophisticated way.

People realized what a difference it made whether one looked at young diocesan priests, or religious orders or even young nuns, and that the changes could not be attributed to the council or its critics, but to the fact that a young man or woman in 1970 had other options than in 1950. In the end this Catholicism of the middle class for better or worse is a demonsticized Catholicism.

So, since Catholicism as a cultural principle has to do with division of labour and institutional learning (and the Catholic type of problem – solving is experimentation in special communities) one of the questions of course is, what will replace the religious orders in future, or to remember the German sociologist Helmut Schelsky: what kinds of forms are still available to institutionalize reflexion?

I would point at the Catholic schools and universities as a new kind of milieu but we lack the time to discuss this. So let me close by saying that American Catholicism (as unlikely as it looked from an evolutionary perspective) succeeded in being American and Catholic because of the ability to create social institutions.

Prof. Dr. Michael Zöllner, Universität Bayreuth, PF 10 12 51, 95440 Bayreuth